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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 003760

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TAGS: [BAIR](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: LOOMING AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL STRIKE POSES RISKS FOR  
PASSENGERS AND PLANES

Classified By: Economic Counselor Robert P. Ludan, 1.4 b and d.

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) The Air Transportation Office (ATO) and the Philippine Air Traffic Controllers Association (PATCA) appear locked in an on-going dispute about overtime pay that erupted into several recent work slowdowns last week and the imminent threat of a strike. If the accusations of undermanned control stations and overworked controllers are true and a strike or further slow-downs are looming, the situation poses enhanced risks in flight delays and passenger safety. Embassy will be meeting with the ATO and Department of Transportation and Communications this week for a read-out on the purported labor problems and efforts to ensure the safety of all planes into and out of the Philippines. End Summary.

2. (U) The Manila Bulletin reported on August 12 that the air traffic controllers (ATC) in the Philippines are planning an imminent strike to underscore their demand for higher pay and additional personnel. The Philippine Air Traffic Controllers Association (PATCA) claimed many experienced flight controllers have left the country and are now making the equivalent of their former annual salary each month working as air traffic controllers abroad. The head of the Philippine Air Transportation Office (ATO), Assistant Secretary Nilo Jatico, downplayed the potential for a strike

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but warned flight controllers not to take drastic action that could compromise the safety of planes and passengers. He said the ATO has contingency plans to ensure the continuation of safe aviation operations in the country.

3. (C) Embassy substantiated the seriousness of this labor dispute between the Philippine Government and the air traffic controllers. Econoff obtained a confidential letter from ATO A/S Jatico to Secretary of Transportation and Communications (DOTC) Leandro Mendoza dated August 7. In the letter, Jatico informed Secretary Mendoza that the air traffic controllers (ATC) initiated a work slowdown at 0715 on August 6. All the controllers on duty, including one supervisor, "absented themselves without prior notice." Forewarned, Jatico said he pre-empted the action by calling a safety and security alert and augmenting the controllers with volunteers and retirees from the provinces, members of the Philippine Air Force, and select ATC students. Jatico successfully pre-empted the controllers again when they tried to delay local flights early on August 7 and promised that "those involved and liable will be immediately investigated and sanctioned within the full force of law." He requested a DOTC order giving him blanket authority to deal with "strikers and destabilizers in the ATO."

4. (C) Embassy recently received another confidential letter from Senator Francis Pangilinan to DOTC Secretary Mendoza, dated April 20, 2005, noting complaints of "undue delays in departures and arrivals of all airlines operating in Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA)." An attachment to the Senator's letter blames these delays on inadequate staffing and inefficiency in air traffic control. Although the control stations must be manned 24 hours a day, the "already limited staff refuses to work extra hours because of NAIA's failure to pay overtime." The attachment complains that the high workload and the lack of air traffic controllers has caused not just inconvenience and delays but has placed passengers and planes at risk. For example, the letter cites cases in which insufficient staffing resulted in unmanned controller stations, caused several flights to run low on fuel while waiting for landing clearance, and led to "instances of near misses due to lack of sufficient monitoring." Senator Pangilinan asked Secretary Mendoza to "submit a report on the alleged incidents and a plan of action" to address these urgent concerns.

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COMMENT  
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15. (SBU) If the accusations of undermanned, overworked, and disgruntled air traffic controllers are true, the country may face potential safety hazards and an interruption in its air operations. Embassy officials will be meeting this week with Assistant Secretary Jatiko from the Air Transportation Office and Undersecretary of Air Operations Pagunsan at DOTC for a read-out on the labor situation and status of plane and passenger safety.

JOHNSON